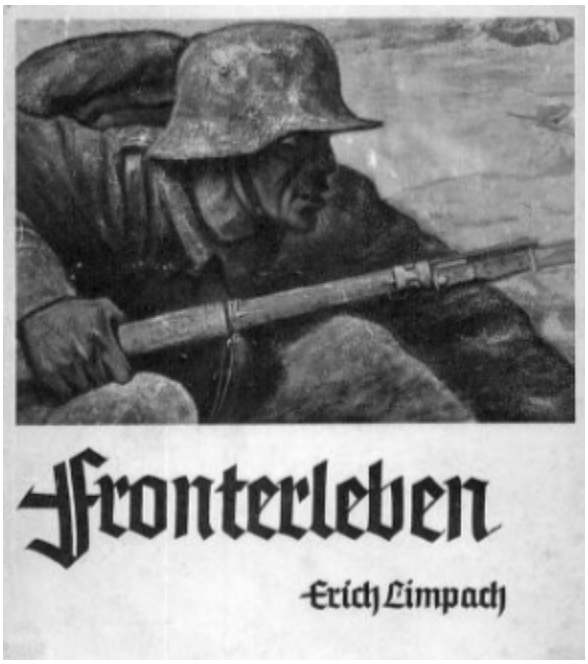
Frontline Experiences - Poems of War

by Erich Limpach
with illustrations based on originals by Otto Engelhardt-Kyffhäuser



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“The Great War lives on in these poems, which reveal the soul of the German soldier at the front; rarely has this powerful experience been described in such a simple, pure, and moving way as in these timeless poems by Erich Limpach, accompanied by Otto Engelhardt-Kysshäuser's masterful illustrations.
Worthy of the heroic songs of our ancestors, a towering memorial has been erected here to the greatest event of our time - in this work, soldiers of the World War will be moved to rediscover their own experiences, and young people will be touched by the spirit that made the German armies invincible and laid the foundation for the resurgence of our people; may these songs live on beyond our time as a legacy of the generation of the Great War, and continue to have an effect on the immortal German soul.”

In memory of the field marshal
Erich Ludendorff

“What Moves Us”

What moves us as we stride forward,
Cannot be summed up in dry words.
Death walks too close by our side,
And love, lust, and hate are far from us.

It is a quiet fulfillment of duty,
A melancholy thought of home,
A shy concealment from the gaze of strangers,
An ever-renewed devotion to the whole.

The narrow paths we walk in silence,
Which to the battle-scarred trenches we descend,
Do not lend us the sound of fluttering flags,
Or songs proclaiming victory ahead.

What moves us as we stride forward
Is not the jubilant reaching for laurels,
but the serious preparation for battle -
A constant dependence on our own strength.

“At Your Post”

The seconds drip by perpetually slowly,
You imagine yourself lonely on an extinct star,
And sometimes it is as if war and its wounds
Have drifted gently away, unreachably distant.

Then time rushes by again on swift wings,
When the calm around you proves to be an illusion
And the enemy's deadly greeting
Plunges you from quiet reflection into chaos.

You stand spellbound in the din of wild sounds,
Once again among guardians of life and death.
And what your yearnings just now saw as appealing
Becomes lifeless before the steel command.

“Verdun”

The war has destroyed the last forests,
Death has taken up residence in wet ravines,
And where the earth once bore seed and fruit,
Steel and rubble are now its only adornment.

The battle has devoured the bare hills,
The paths are almost unrecognizable with mud,
And where the farmer once had his house and cattle,
Only rats remain as guests in the rubble.

The rain pours down, the grenades roar,
Iron burrows into many a gray platoon.
Here, no glory falls on heroic deeds,
For true greatness is enough in itself.

Here, dying is easier than living,
Horror is cheap, misery is enormous,
And those whom Verdun has given back to his being,
Have become friends with the Grim Reaper.

“March… March…”

We don't know where we're going -
The road is strange, the night is dark,
Perhaps to the Somme, perhaps to Flanders,
We only know - we are going into battle.

A fine rain is falling,
Our uniforms are wet and heavy.
At first, someone curses now and then -
After a while, even they fall silent.

The clouds haunt us – like ghosts,
A cold wind sweeps across the land,
The farmhouses windows are darkened,
And we march on – unceasingly.

Our thoughts go their own way –
Our steps are now dream-sure –
They soar over a thousand borders,
And suddenly our homeland follows.

The rain runs down—the clouds drift,
Entrenching tools and rifles clatter softly,
Only now and then does a red glow
Reach us from far away.

We don't know where we are going—
The road is strange and the night is dark,
Perhaps to the Somme, perhaps to Flanders,
We only know—we are going into battle.

“New Life”

On the smoke-blackened rim of a crater,
Which a shell had dug into the earth,
There I found a little flower
And felt deep within me a sacred knowledge:
How this flower here, in hardship and death,
Delights me with the beauty of its being,
And so the eternal command of life,
Proudly and victoriously approaches death—
So in the end, this too will come to pass
And see new life at its edge.

"Before the Storm”

The gray figures huddle together in the tunnel,
Only now and then does a sparse word fall,
The stairs rumble with the roar of war,
And here and there, glimmers of light shine from the darkness.

The light has long since been extinguished by the air pressure,
Only the cigarettes glow,
In one corner, you can hear mice squeaking,
And someone curses to himself in a bad mood.

Then a snore breaks the dull silence,
The young lieutenant nervously keeps track of time,
The sentries can be heard climbing into the trench,
And the seconds become an eternity.

Only when twilight haunts the entrance
Is all rigidity banished like a spectre -
And the troops, masters of their explosives,
Frantically scatter into no man's land.

“Tomorrow At the Front”

A pale dawn rises far away in the east,
A fine rain trickles down,
The war still sleeps, and only the silent sentries
Are awake, stirring their stiffened limbs.

The night's activity have given way to light,
The food gatherers have long been sleeping in the trenches,
Along with those who roamed the front
Who had fought hard with the enemy.

Even the guns are shrouded in silence,
And only rarely do the rifles rattle,
Nor are flares seen rising anymore -
For a few hours, the armies sleep all around.

A pale dawn rises far away in the east,
A fine rain trickles down,
The war still sleeps, and only the silent sentries
Are awake, stirring their stiffened limbs.

“The Dead Forest”

Moonlight haunts charred trees,
The dead forest became a primeval landscape,
Here, the madness of wild fever dreams
Found gruesome form on foreign soil.

No leaf remains green on bare, dry branches,
No bird chirps its tender lullaby,
No grazing game wants to show itself to the hunter,
No more flowers bloom brightly in the moss.

Grenades burrow into mangled branches,
Patrols rush through the ghostly world,
War rages in these barren remains,
Until even the last dead trunk is felled.

The mists rise from swampy craters
And silently envelop the scene of horror,
Decayed stumps draw with verdant lights
The lost into misery and death.

“Night in the Tunnel”

After a hard day, night has now fallen,
For a few hours, all is quiet in the tunnel,
The dim light has long since faded,
Only somewhere in the distance can a quiet rumbling be heard.

One murmurs strange sounds in his sleep,
Another dreams of distant, beautiful things,
A third stays awake—because he saw death today,
Even the night cannot bring him peace.

Drops fall in an ominous rhythm,
Mice can be heard fighting over a piece of bread,
The tunnel boards creak now and then—
Until morning silhouettes drift around the entrance.

“Marching Into the Battle of Flanders”

We set off in the gray twilight,
The quiet place is now far behind us,
The warm straw from where we grumpily laid,
Now serves others for brief dreams and happiness.

We are held in thrall by the familiar path,
Which leads from twilight into the dawn,
The path to the front, which we have walked so often,
Which always stirs our souls anew.

The intact houses are gradually becoming scarce,
The wounded rush past us in silence,
The border between two foreign worlds gently approaches
And reveals the sight of battle and chaos.

The path we walk in silence is muddy,
The burden we carry forward weighs heavily,
The colorful lights at the front burn out,
And within us live the same old jumbled questions.

The first dead lie unburied,
Just as death overtook them in the night -

Even though we have often seen this image -
Our feet strive onward, but our hearts linger.

The morning mist has almost completely disappeared,
Grenades thunder through the youthful day,
The earth is covered with a thousand wounds -
And everyone wonders what may yet come.

The shrapnel sings its old songs,
We stride faster - now hunted by death -
And find ourselves gravely in the position
That has become home, even if no one says so.

“Flanders Marsh”

Here death stalks through swamps and mire,
Here the world war rolls on—like a lindworm—
Shattering the land with its mighty weight,
Breathing fire through its arid realm.

Here people fight, devoid of all hope,
Sinking into the mud, fighting their fiercest battle,
Here stands in the shadows all that was horror,
Here the war has ignited into madness.

Here lunacy rages through a field of craters,
So that all around a forest of mud plumes sprays,
Here what is smashed is smashed a hundredfold,
While the sky glows, drunk with fire.

Here the earth barren with the narrowest grave,
Here death will be a burden to its silent being -
Those who heroically gave their lives here in battle,
Are silently enveloped by mud and craters.

“Christmas in the Field”

Water drips from damp tunnel walls,
A thick smoke fills the narrow space,
Meanwhile, two men with clumsy hands
Work diligently on a fir tree.

The sparse branches are filled with saved candles,
Three small apples, some colored paper -
And yet, to the hard hearts of these men,
the meager tree appears to be the most beautiful Christmas decoration.

Then silence reigns in the narrow circle,
only now and then a letter crackles,
the war continues to hum its dull tune,
and sometimes one breathes heavily and deeply.

As well as the comrades know each other,
And each knows how the other is doing,
They all strive to keep the quiet burning
In their eyes unseen.

Only when the candles have long since burned out
And a sentry joins them, searching,
Have they quietly returned from afar
To their solemn Christmas Eve in the field.

“In Peace”

The noise of battle faded into a distant rumble,
The field of craters gave way to acres, forests, and pastures,
Death remained ahead in the trenches and tunnels—
For a few days, war will spare us.

We walk silently through undamaged streets,
We see women, hear children singing,
We can hardly comprehend all that is new -
But we cannot feel true joy.

Only very slowly do we feel the shadows recede
That weigh heavily on our hearts,
But something remains and cannot be erased—
The solemn sound of the front behind us.

The days fly by, we remain strangers to peace,
As long as our people still stand against the enemy,
True rest will only come to us
When we return to our positions at night.

“The Little Song”

After hard days, it seems to be over
In a small Welsh resting place,
The front came only with the wind's breath,
We had already carried away our dead.
Then, into our dull thoughts,
A tender song in a foreign language sounded loud;
A woman's heart had built a dam deep inside
With hidden longing.
We did not know where the song came from,
That touched us so suddenly and wondrously -
We took it with us forward
And often felt its magic again.

“The Great Battle in France”

Once again, the front seeks to break the spell
That has forced them into the trenches for years.
Once again, the calls shall speak
That once inspired a people's victorious march.

And even if hardship and death lie in between
And horror and misery—piled high as mountains—
The urge to defeat the enemies still lives on,
And he who storms the ramparts leads the way.

A hail of iron roars toward the enemy,
Leaving what was in the past to fade away, meaningless.
An army awaits the command on all sides,
While the attackers silently look ahead.

The wall of fire slowly pushes forward,
The land is shrouded in gas and fog,
Gray warriors rush through smoke and craters,
The air is filled with sharp battle cries.

The enemy retreats, and death bears a heavy burden,
The way is clear—once again the spell is broken—
And the noble dignity of Germanness shines brightly

Above death and ruins, victorious toward the sky.

“Nighttime Interlude”

Torn clouds chase across the land,
The night has halted the attack,
Only here and there does a distant fire still glow,
And silent stretchers search for the dead.

An ill-tempered cold wind blows from the enemy,
The storm troops sleep on the damp earth,
The sentries shiver, and the rain pours down,
The horses shake near the guns.

Ruins stand ghostly in the night,
Only rarely does a shot disturb the dull silence,
For a few short hours, the great battle rests
And gathers strength for a new, bloody dance.

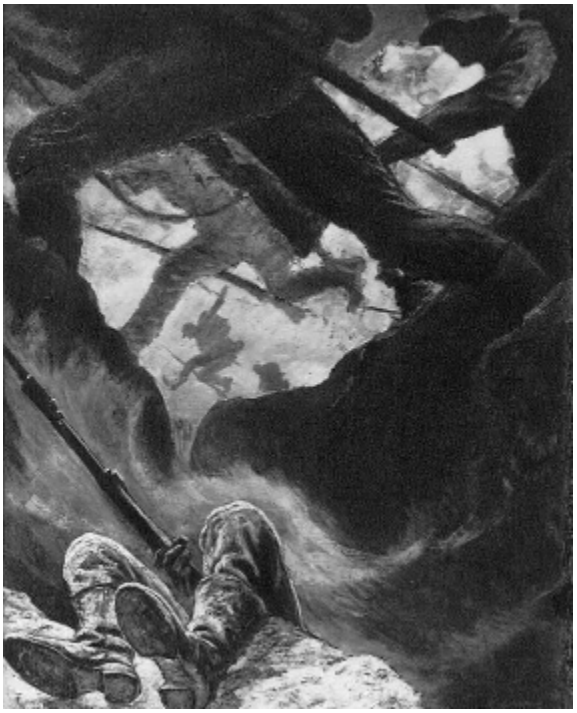
“Soldier’s Grave”

A bird sings on a small grave
A jubilant song of life,
A rusty helmet sways to and fro,
A cornfield ripens beside it.

No name tells who rests here,
Only the wind whispers softly
Of heroic death and red blood
In a most wondrous way.

The simple grave on the road to battle
Is a most sacred sign—
To the dead man who watches silently,
We offer our handshake.

“Somme”



The villages are buried in rubble and dust,
The forests have been destroyed by hot steel,
The sky glows and blazes, drunk with fire,
Where once there were fields, there are now craters.

No leaves are green anymore, and no ears of corn sway,
The plowshare rusts, and the scythes are silent,
The last laughter has long since faded away,
And only death can be heard in the wind.

Only the paths still know life,
Which manifests itself here at night as a ghostly presence
And, with the melancholy weaving of desolation,
Takes on a gloomy image of horror.

“Forward!”

The water shimmers in the craters,
A thick mud hinders every step,
And on the pale faces of the front line
Is carved what each has suffered.

So the column trudges at dawn
In dull silence into battle.
No one knows who will see the day,
No one knows who will still be alive in the night.

And yet the gray column
Pushes steadily toward the enemy,
Death racing alongside it—
As a comrade on familiar terms.

“Barrage”

Storming iron pierces the air,
Crashing down with a resounding roar,
Opening up fields, houses, and graves,
Indiscriminately ravaging in senseless fury.

A thousand volcanoes scar the earth,
Shrouded in toxic gases,
Mortally lacerated, staring with weary gaze
Dumbly into the gigantic fury of war.

Flames spray forth with greedy tongues,
Blazing upward into ghastly beacons,
Everything that was worthy and successful becomes worthless,
Consumed by fire, drummed, pulverized.

Yet Germans are the bearers of war,
Waiting in the craters of the storming waves,
Guardians of honor and heroic victory,
Letting wave after wave crash down.

“From Back to Front”

The front has long since faded behind us,
But death accompanied us on the way back,
The barrage hammered out the pace,
The flag was made of gas and smoke.

We moved silently through mud and craters,
Cold horror clung to our necks,
Shrapnel whizzed around us,
We did not believe we would see the day.

Now the battlefield is behind us,
We stand helpless before the peace offerings,
For our souls are devoted to the front,
And our thoughts wander silently to the trenches.

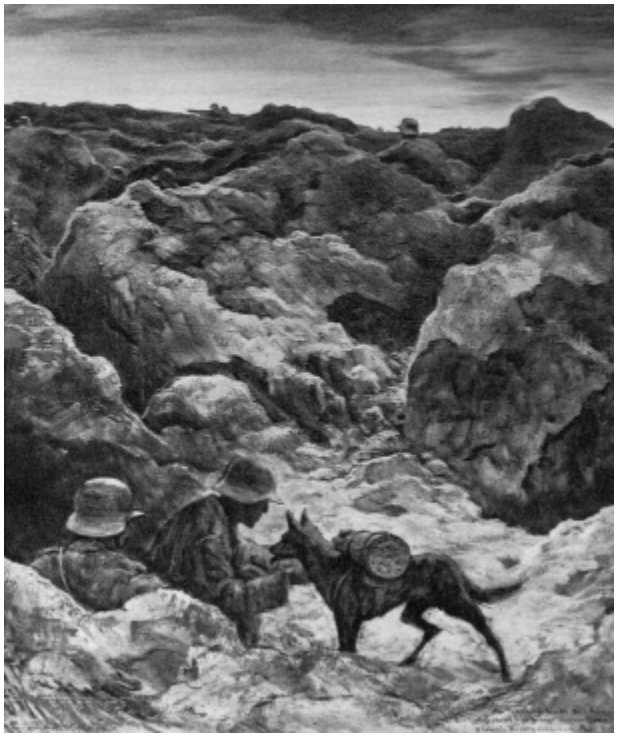
“Dead Land”

Silent horror haunts dark tunnels,
A weary wind laments around the remains of walls,
The trees have long since lost their leaves,
And fields once stood where deserts are today.

The harsh war has driven away the birds,
And it has also taken the people away,
Only rats have remained concealed,
And pale corpses lie here and there.

Only from afar can the noise of battle be heard,
The war moved on, which once ruled here -
It was probably the addiction to destroy new things
That made it steal quietly away from this wasteland.

“1918”



No cheerful song accompanies us forward,
No marching footsteps echo through barren craters,
No calfskin drum booms, no bright horn sounds,
And it has been a long time since joyful eyes greeted us.

Today, hardship sings its relentless song,
As gray men march forward in silence,
Grenades rage, and the sky glows,
And death approaches each one, strapped to their sides.

We trudge along, unspeakably lonely,
To venture into the difficult battle again and again,
We have long since stopped asking about the meaning—
Here, only the heart can still give an answer.

“Pioneer”

There are not many more who stand in the fire
And defend the honor of their people there,
There are many more who only see today
And save their lives for servitude.

But those few who have remained faithful
And always confront the enemy anew,
Driven solely by the call of their souls -
They quietly pave the way to new horizons.

They have left everything behind
That people otherwise strive to attain,
They learned to strive earnestly for a higher goal:
To devote themselves to greatness without hope.

“No Man’s Land”

A field of craters haunted by horror,
A narrow strip of land separating peoples,
A bloody plain ravaged by explosives,
A patch of earth that knows only bravery.

“The Dead City”

The city has become a haven of madness,
which once gave people bread and refuge
and today, surrounded by cruel slaughter,
collapses into a gloomy grave.

Broken walls suddenly collapse,
Cold wind sweeps through empty windows,
Red flames lick around black beams,
Shells boom, and rain pours down:

Death has taken up residence in deserted streets,
Horror perches on rotten ruins,
Rats greedily scavenge around wretched corpses,
And somewhere, heavy mines explode.

A toy rusts next to a gray helmet,
Possessions and riches rot in the alleys,
As if a mad scoundrel
Had left behind a wild chaos, grinning.

The last houses are consumed by hot steel,
The ugly cold rain still pours down,
And through the alleys, gray and pale,
Death-defying men march toward the approaching front.

“Nevertheless”

A strange picture: the gaunt figures,
Shivering as they gaze into the meager fire,
Who here, faced with the mysterious workings of war,
Are armed only with curses.

They have fought all over the world
And rarely troubled themselves with meaning,
But now, at the end, a demanding question
Has flared up in their hard hearts.

They called it madness what they did for years,
The sacrifices senseless, which they made in silence,
They feel betrayed by the whole world
And stare desolately into the rainy night.

But as the day dawns gloomily in the east
And a dull glow breaks in the puddles,
As the familiar drumfire hammers away -
They silently do their solemn duty.

“The Last on the Front Line”

There is no more glorious victory to be won here,
The last hope was buried long ago,
No song or laughter wants to ring out here anymore,
Because here a people gave too many of its best.

Here, only the dead, defiant and dogged fight on,
Faithful to their duty, a last stand,
In which—deep inside—the sacred knowledge
Of a people's eternal honor burns brightly.

Infinitely lonely stand the last grey-clad men,
Commanding themselves in the din of battle,
While the fog brews around the craters,
And betrayal makes the enemy the victor.

“A Soldier’s Death”

I no longer know where your grave lies,
Whether the storm took away the meagre sign,
On which we once inscribed your name
And a word that came from the heart.

I only remember that it was in Flanders,
Where death found you and many others -
On a sunny, clear autumn day,
When war loomed like a curse.

I also remember that we searched
The difficult path behind us, as the grenades flung out,
That behind us the sky glowed red
And one swore against the madness of war.

Then we stood solemnly around your narrow grave
And no one could find a single word to say -
It was a bird that sang you a little song -
The war drove us on to new battles.

I no longer know where your grave lies,
Perhaps corn waves over your silent rest -
But deep within me, it is engraved,
There, comrade, you are unforgotten.

“Flanders”

This word is stirred by its own breath,
It is written in the blood of the world's events,
A heroic song stands before its beginning,
At its end: many, many remained.

The heroic song has long since faded away in the wind,
And the earth once again bears its sheaves.
The trees are green in the Houthulsterwald,
And Langemarck stands new, without its scars.

Only graves tell what once was here,
Perhaps it still lives in the singing of the wind,
But what Flanders gave birth to for the future
Will resonate undyingly through the ages.

“Outlook”

From rubble and debris, new life rises
And strives toward the shining light;
And those who gave their lives for Germany
Are the seeds of the harvest, which on all paths
Is already approaching maturity,
Miraculously illuminated by the splendor of the eternal.